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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that the twentieth-century ecumenical movement was coeval with the beginning of a "language revolution" and the "theology of crisis," it was only at the beginning of the present decade that the problem of unity in verbal formulations reached the agenda of the World Council of Churches (WCC). At that time the WCC had no policy concerning language, apart from the choice of 3 official languages: French, German, and English. In 1971, the newly created Education and Communication Unit established a Language Policy Task Force (LPTF) to review the language policy of the WCC. The investigations uncovered a large degree of insensitivity on the part of English mother-tongue speakers and a rising level of frustration on the part of others. The efforts of the LPTF resulted in a series of practical recommendations and steps, including the distribution of a questionnaire to all staff members, which yielded the information that over 50 languages were spoken by staff. Other steps included the broadening of membership of the LPTF to include more staff from Asia, Africa and Latin America; encouragement of a multilingual style in WCC meetings; and subsidized courses to encourage staff to learn second language skills. Other practical steps were taken in subsequent years, notably the 1976 decision to add Russian and Spanish to the group of official WCC "working languages." (AM)

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Language in the Ecumenical Movement

David Lewis*

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

"Looking back now to the years just before the First World War," says George Steiner in his essay "The Language Animal,"[1] "we can recognize the beginnings of a 'language revolution'." "Like most true revolutions, it has behind it a distinctive failure of nerve." Significantly enough, this language crisis and revolution, this rediscovery of the central role and the limits of the linguistic dimension in man and human culture, was contemporaneous both with the re-emergence of the Ecumenical Movement and with the appearance of the European 'theology of crisis' associated with the Swiss theologian Karl Barth.

The theology of crisis and the crisis of language both had their origin in the breakdown of liberal humanism in the first quarter of this century, in the sickness of European civilization suddenly erupting in the catastrophe of the First World War, then in the totalitarianisms of the post war period, in the Holocaust and the Second World War, and today in the stark contrast between the deeds of governments and nations and such verbal achievements as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *Helsinki Final Act*.

Whatever else the Ecumenical Movement may be, it has undoubtedly been a language exercise on a massive scale. The exercise has been both diachronic and synchronic, wrestling with traditional verbal formulations of centuries of division *and* seeking to achieve agreement and unity across the contemporary Bable of tongues.

Despite the fact that the twentieth century ecumenical movement was coeval with the beginning of the 'language revolution' and with Barth's 'theology of crisis', it was only at the beginning of the present decade that the language problem reached the ecumenical agenda. Within the World Council of Churches, staff work on this problem began only in 1971. Even now the place of this theme on the agenda is a precarious one.

In January of 1971, the Central Committee[2] of the World Council of Churches (WCC) met in Addis Ababa. Among its major actions was the adoption of the final report of the structure committee. Of interest here is the program unit called "Education and Communication." Until this unit was created, language problems had been under the General Secretariat whose duties included: 'general supervision and coordination of . . . publications,' 'interpretation of the work of the Council to the churches and the public' and 'activities not otherwise assigned.' This latter activity included translation and interpretation. Within the General Secretariat there was a small 'Translation Section', a Department of Information and a Department of Publications. Some time after 1967, these three separate sections were amalgamated into a Department of Communications. In 1971, this Department became part of the new Education and Communication Unit and the Translation section was given the new and more appropriate name of Language Service, under this unit.

From 1967 onwards, the Committee responsible for this conglomerate of information, publications and language, was feeling its way toward a more

(Continued on next page)

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coherent communications policy. In its 1971 report, the Committee pointed out that apart from the choice of three official languages, the World Council of Churches had at that time no agreed understanding of policy concerning language. The Committee report went on to say that the creation of the Education and Communication Unit 'provides the appropriate occasion and framework for a careful review, made in collaboration with people professionally qualified in this field, of the place and use of language in the Ecumenical movement.'

One of the first steps taken by the staff director of the new Education and Communication unit was to set up a staff 'Language Policy Task Force' (LPTF)[3] to review the language policy of the WCC. The LPTF 'brought together the concern of many who felt that the language policy and practices of the World Council of Churches needed drastic re-appraisal.' In 1972 the LPTF put out a paper entitled "The Threat of Monolingualism in the WCC." Relating language to the total activity of ecumenical fellowship, the report raised fundamental questions about communication. It emphasized that present language policy placed the majority of member churches and their participants at a serious disadvantage, because all who did not speak English as a mother tongue operated with a considerable handicap. In short, it said, language is power and present WCC policy results in an unjust sharing of power. Urged by the Central Committee to expand and continue its work, the LPTF explored the problem further and discovered a large degree of insensitivity on the part of English mother-tongue speakers and a rising level of frustration on the part of others. The staff 'week of meetings' in May 1973 included a plenary presentation of the language problem by the LPTF. This and the ensuing discussion was a fairly successful attempt to develop staff sensitivity to the issues. The 1973 report of the LPTF stated that 'human communication only becomes possible through common involvement in common action' and called in question the entire style of involvement in WCC affairs.

Practical follow-up from the 1973 Central Committee took several forms. Membership of the LPTF was broadened to include more staff members from Asia, Africa and Latin America. A more multilingual style was encouraged and developed in WCC meetings. Staff interest in learning languages and developing language skills was encouraged by subsidized courses. A questionnaire to all staff elicited useful information about available language skills, including the discovery that over 50 languages were spoken by staff members. Discussion of the language problem outside the WCC was promoted as a result of the interest shown in the LPTF's work within the Ecumenical Movement and beyond. The question of the languages used in WCC periodicals and publications was taken up, and a recommendation made that the Library should provide a wider range of books and periodicals in African, Asian and Latin American languages. Other practical recommendations were made concerning languages at the forthcoming Fifth Assembly, many of which were adopted. Finally a detailed set of proposals was presented concerning the Language Service and future WCC language policy.

At the 1975 Assembly itself, the delegates were reminded of language as a problem. The *Work Book* (a preparatory guide to the program and work of the Assembly), included a paragraph on "languages" in which among other things it was pointed out that 'interpretation facilities are provided to enhance the exchange and comprehension of views' and exhorted delegates to 'make full use of them both for speaking themselves and for listening to others.' Delegates were told that if they were tempted to stop listening because the speaker was using a language they could not follow easily, they should resist the temptation.[3] People were encouraged to speak whichever of the three 'working languages' (French, German or English) they were most fluent in and reminded that English was not obligatory. It was pointed out that the Rules permitted the use of other languages beside the 'working languages' and that adequate additional time would be allowed when consecutive interpretation was necessary. The delegates were also reminded that it would be helpful if they spoke clearly and distinctly and avoided unnecessarily complicated or idiomatic expressions.

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On the initiative of the LPTF, the 1974 Central Committee decided to charge a group of delegates at the Assembly with a watching brief on language and communication questions during the Assembly. This group of language consultants met several times during the Assembly to share observations and experiences and on two occasions took action in letters to moderators, drawing their attention to remediable language problems and frustrations experienced by delegates and making practical suggestions. The group also circulated to all delegates and participants a questionnaire on their language experiences at the Assembly, and on the basis of the replies, produced a detailed report for the Central Committee meeting in Geneva in 1976. One of the most effective contributions at the Assembly on the language issue came in a key-note address in plenary when the speaker drew attention to 'language imperialism' in the Ecumenical Movement and underlined his point by giving the rest of his address in Spanish — instead of in his mother tongue.

At the 1976 meeting of the Central Committee in Geneva, the language policy of the WCC was further refined as follows: "to recognize for the time being English, French, German, Russian and Spanish as working languages of the Council." This policy differed from earlier policies in two major ways first, the addition of Spanish and Russian to the 'working languages.' And secondly, the use of the phrase 'for the time being' emphasizing a refusal to establish any particular language as 'ecumenical.'

Another decision of the 1976 Central Committee was to ask the General Secretary in consultation with the Department of Communication to bring recommendations to the Executive Committee in 1977 concerning the precise size, composition and assignments of the Geneva-based language service, taking into account the working languages adopted for policy-making committees, the estimated translation and interpretation needs of these committees and the needs of the various sub-units and departments. A training program to build up translation and interpretation skills in the regions was authorized, provided finances could be raised outside the general budget. This has been pursued as far as funding has permitted; a promising beginning has been made in several regions of the world.

In 1973, for pragmatic operational reasons, the Department of Communication was removed from the Education and Communication Unit and relocated under the General Secretariat.

In February, 1977, the Executive Committee agreed that the present level of staff be maintained in the Language Service and that the implementation of the training program for translators and interpreters in the regions be added to the tasks of the Language Service. The present Language Service consists of only nine permanent staff: six translators working from three other languages into their respective mother tongues, French, German and English, with two administrators and a Head of Service.

In addition there is a roster of outside translators and interpreters. Money (or the lack of it) is, of course, a problem.

Is this a happy ending? Speaking personally, I confess to a strong conviction that the Ecumenical Movement has still a major task ahead of it to develop sensitivity to the place of language and languages in the movement toward the unity of the Church and of human beings. Language may now have struggled onto the ecumenical agenda and have established its place there. But the full treatment it deserves is still ahead.

NOTES

1. In Extraterritorial, *Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution by George Steiner. London: Faber and Faber, 1972.*
2. *Quotations and information are taken from the published* Minutes *of the Central Committee of the WCC.*
3. *Information on the LPTF given here is taken from* Uppsala to Nairobi, *1968-1975, Report of the Central Committee to the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, ed. by David Johnston. 1975. New York: Friendship Press and London: SPCK.*

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2. LPTF Paper for Week of Meetings, *Geneva, May 1973.*
3. Interviews on Language Policy and Practice in the WCC, *LPTF and Language Service Paper, Geneva 1973.*
4. LPTF Report to Central Committee, *Geneva 1973,* Minutes, *App. VI.*
5. LPTF Third Report and Recommendations, *Central Committee, West Berlin, 1975, Doc. 4.*
6. Towards a Language Policy for the World Council of Churches, *Fifth Assembly 1975, Hearing on General Secretariat, Doc. 8.*
7. Report of the Language Consultants, *Central Committee, Geneva 1976, Doc. GS 5.*

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1. Language Service WCC.
2. Ecumenical Terminology, Terminologie Oecuménique, Ökumenische Terminologie, Terminología Ecuménica, *WCC Geneva 1975.*